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Atmahaú Pakmát

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Atmahaú Pakmát

by

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Report

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Abstract

Atmahaú Pakmát

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This report concerns *Atmahaú Pakmát*, a non-fiction essay film directed by Cameron Gates Quevedo. A journey into the heart the US-Mexico borderlands reveals a world of ancient rivers, mud, and brick.

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Introduction

As my time as an MFA graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin comes to a close, it will prove useful to take a moment to reflect upon the past few years of filmmaking and artistic growth. This document will trace the development of my thesis film, *Atmahaú Pakmát*, in an attempt to draw larger conclusions about my creative trajectory, as well as potential future paths as I transition into the next stage of my career as a filmmaker. In addition to being a means of exploring my personal process, this report will also serve as a vehicle through which to begin exploring greater questions about the nature of film as a medium, the act of filmmaking, and the role of the filmmaker. It is my hope that the pages that follow will serve as a useful guide to my current film, as well as a resource to which I may look back in the future and view as an important “snapshot” of my work at a particular moment.

This report is divided into six parts: an introduction, four chapters that follow a distinct phase of production, and a conclusion. Chapter 1 explores the early development of *Atmahaú Pakmát*, including my initial interests, other potential projects that were considered, and the like. Chapter 2 focuses on the pre-production stage, including location scouting, fundraising, and the development of a particular style, aesthetic approach, and thematic focus. Chapter 3 explores the production or “filming” stage, including our filming days in West Texas, Northern Mexico, and Houston. Chapter 4 focuses on the post-production and editing stage, exploring my overall approach to editing, as well as the larger aesthetic and philosophical questions that arose during this stage. Finally, the report closes with a discussion of how *Atmahaú Pakmát* fits into my larger trajectory as a filmmaker and artist, and how this project has prepared me for upcoming and future work. Throughout the following pages, I occasionally include

excerpts from journal entries written over the course of a year and half. These entries serve in retracing the development of *Atmahaú Pakmát* and the evolution of my orientation to the film. It is my hope that the report will provide a measured look at my personal process, and encourage the reader to ask questions, engage with the larger philosophical debates found therein, and consider my work in a larger context of both film history and exploration via the moving image.

Chapter 1: Development

At a personal level, the development stage of any film project is one filled with play, intrigue, and curiosity. To understand how I arrived at the subject of *Atmahaú Pakmát*, it is necessary to briefly review my previous work and interests. Through my previous career as an ethnomusicologist with a specialization in regional music of Mexico, my eye as a filmmaker has always leaned towards the ethnographic, the exploratory, and the historical. These tendencies are apparent in my first film made as a graduate student at the University of Texas. *Typewriter Rodeo* follows a band of rag-tag guerrilla poets who improvise poetry on antique typewriters, gifting their work to those that request poems of a particular theme. The analog nature of the group's typewriters and their improvisatory, "do it yourself" spirit represented a fascinating opportunity to peer into a world about which I knew little. *El Tucán*, the second documentary I produced as a graduate student at UT, constituted a continued exploration of these overall themes and interests. The film, in following the last days of four rural musicians, lies close to my training as an ethnomusicologist and interest in the historical. Much like the antique typewriters of *Typewriter Rodeo*, the musicians in *El Tucán* and the instrument that they play may soon become a thing of the past. Due to the long-reaching and detrimental agricultural effects of NAFTA, the plant from which the musicians' instrument (the güiro) is made has become nearly extinct in the region. Both *Typewriter Rodeo* and *El Tucán* are representative as to how my previous training has influenced my filmic interests and tendencies towards the ethnographic, the exploratory, and the historical.

My MFA thesis film represents an intentional break from this trajectory and an attempt to take my work in new directions. In beginning to consider potential thesis projects, I set three parameters for myself: 1) To work with a subject other than music or

other “folk” cultures, 2) To film along the U.S.-Mexico border, and 3) To work with artisans and/or explore “manual” crafts (e.g. sculpture, pottery, installation work, and the like). An early journal entry dated from October 1st, 2015 reveals my interest in “manual-ity,” and its effect on my filmmaking:

In considering the nature of filmmaking— should it be considered “subtractive,” like sculpture? Or perhaps it is “additive,” as with painting? [...] My understanding of the arts as subtractive vs. additive is rather unsophisticated, but perhaps it is true in the most classic sense. What might a filmmaker learn from a sculptor? A painter? What about these processes is akin to the process of making a film? How are the hands used in each? What parallels may be drawn in the end (pp. 99)?

My interest in “manual-ity” and use of the hands led me to begin researching the work of artists working along the U.S.-Mexico border. While I discovered several fascinating artists (the most memorable was a Reynosa-based artist who made larger than life surrealist piñatas of animals—alligators, giant fish, and other creatures), I did not feel drawn to the story of any of these in regards to profiling them in my thesis film. After a few weeks of preliminary research and exploration, I turned my focus to another topic of interest—the alterative housing movement. I became very interested in Texas-based individuals who were living in non-traditional homes, off the grid, and/or who were innovating and creatively responding to life in Texas. This led me to the stories of an Austin-based educator who lives in a converted dumpster and an elderly man who creates eco-homes from junkyard scraps in a response to government surveillance. While each of these stories had their respective charm as well, neither called out as the topic for my thesis film.

After a few initial weeks of seemingly unsuccessful research, I found myself exploring the website of a West Texas-based non-profit named the Adobe Alliance. The Adobe Alliance, based in the border town of Presidio, Texas, had as its mission to “help

those in need of housing who cannot afford to buy industrial materials, neither wood nor tools, by teaching the hand-crafting of woodless mud brick roofs to cover a space that shelters adobe walls, house, and a self-reliant family.” This piqued my interest. In its own way, the story of the Adobe Alliance (or the people behind it) seemed to meet each of my three criteria—1) it didn’t deal with music or folk culture, per se, 2) it was a story that took place along the border, and 3) it had a strong “manual” component (i.e. the hand-making of adobe bricks). After a few additional weeks of research into the region, the Adobe Alliance, and the subject overall, I began making plans for a research trip to West Texas.

Chapter 2: Pre-production

The pre-production stage for *Atmahaú Pakmát* began as I entered post-production on my previous film, *El Tucán*. As such, the project was only able to advance through pockets of free time or when I found myself in need of a break from editing my then current project. While advances on my thesis film seemed slow at times, they gradually led to a research and scouting trip to West Texas. The trip, which was made from April 14th-27th, 2016, was my first opportunity as a director to observe potential locations for the film, meet potential subjects, and begin developing an overall style and approach for the documentary. The trip was made by four individuals—myself, Makena Buchanan, Jim Hickcox, and Juan Pablo González. During this trip, we were able to tour Swan House, the Adobe Alliance's prototype house, as well as meet with Jesusita Jimenez, the local caretaker of the house. Additionally, Sandro Canovas, our consulting producer who met us in West Texas, was able to introduce us to Manuel, Victor, and José Rodríguez—a family of traditional adobe masons that live in Ojinaga, Chihuahua. Although our visit was short, we were able to make useful connections with individuals in both Presidio and Ojinaga, as well as film preliminary footage that would prove useful for fundraising purposes and in editing together a short conceptual trailer for the film.

The process of fundraising for the film was a long one, but one that would prove very beneficial to the project as a whole. After various months of proposal writing, rewriting, and submitting applications, the film began to gain traction with funders. To date, *Atmahaú Pakmát* has received support from the Princess Grace Foundation, the University Film and Video Association, the National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts, the University of Texas at Austin, the Moody College of Communication, and the CRC

Family Charitable Foundation. Fundraising would continue throughout the pre-production stage, and into the production and post-production stages.

Creating funding proposals for the film provided an opportunity to begin developing the style and filmic approach that would guide the creation of *Atmahaú Pakmát* from idea to its arrival to “the big screen.” One element that has been a part of the film from very early on has been the use of spoken poetry. In a journal entry dated February 24th, 2016, I raise questions as to what effect poetry might have on reception of the film:

What poetry might fit the tone or mood of the film I’d like to make? Perhaps the subjects of the film could recite these poems. Maybe these would serve as poetic interludes, portraits of sorts. [...] What kind of contribution might poetry make to this film? How might it alter the filmic device (pp. 104)?

While the finished film does not feature subjects reading poetry directly, poetry is a critical element of the narration of the film, and helps set the overall tone of the piece from beginning to end.

Another element that has been present in the film since the initial pre-production stage has been the interest in landscapes, specifically, the Chihuahuan Desert (where the film takes place). In an entry dated April 2nd, 2016, I write:

Early morning, golden hour, middle of the Chihuahuan Desert. [...] A long take, perhaps the camera will spool out. As we walk, the camera and the boom circle us. The shadow of the boom stretches across the barren desert floor. Circling, circling. Swan House can be seen in the distance (pp. 143).

My interest in landscapes would be further developed in a class I would eventually take in Fall 2017 titled “Landscape and Cinema,” taught by Professor Lalitha Gopalan. This course would provide me with an opportunity to explore the relationship between landscape and subject, beginning to see landscape *as* subject. The long desert landscape portraits present in *Atmahaú Pakmát* are the direct result of these interests.

A third interest that was developed in the pre-production stage was the use of projected images. After coming across the work of Colombian photographer Jorge Panchoaga, I began to think a great deal about “compound images”—that is, images layered upon other images. In further exploring the work of Panchoaga as well as that of French photographer Dani Olivier, I came to ask the question, “What effect might compound *moving* images have?” While the use of projections in film is nothing new (see Nagisa Ôshima’s *The Man Who Put His Will on Film* for an amazing example), I became very interested in employing such an approach in the Chuihuahuan Desert. For a film that is, in many ways, about materiality and humans’ material relationship with the land, what possibilities might arise in using projections to provoke commentary on this relationship? How might the abstraction of a projection unlock new conversations, new responses, new feelings? Similar to Jean Rouch’s understanding of the camera as a device used to provoke reality into being, I began to see the materiality of the projection itself as a narrative device. That is, telling a story through projections, and using the projections as a means of eliciting *new* stories and reactions. My initial interest in projected images can be found in a journal entry dated July 5th, 2016:

I find myself asking why I’m interested in the projection and the use of projected images. The human form can become something else entirely when an otherwise foreign or new image is introduced. See the work of that French experimental photographer [Dani Olivier] for examples. In a strange way, I feel as if a projected image can function as a mask—it permits play, reflection, and experimentation (pp. 159-160).

Although only one projected image appears in the finished film, projections played an important role in each stage of the film’s development, and will likely continue to play an important role in my work.

Thus far we have discussed a variety of aesthetic devices and thematic interests that began to be developed in the pre-production stage, including the incorporation of

spoken poetry, an interest in landscapes and landscape portraits, and the use of projected images. Another important creative element that was developed during pre-production was a list of “rules” or guidelines for the compositional approach and employment of the camera in the film. These guidelines, developed in conversation with my cinematographer Jim Hickcox, were as follows:

- All sequences (or most of them) will be filmed on a tripod.
- The camera will remain static throughout, and will never pan, tilt, or roll.
- Composition of subjects will lean towards proscenium / tableau.
- Each shot will be composed via quadrants, either in a “cross” (+) or “x” formation. The “rule of thirds” will not be employed.
- Each shot will maintain a sensitivity or awareness of movement and events happening outside of the frame.
- Portraits of landscapes and of locations will be made without humans in the frame.
- The camera will remain sensitive to the geometry, patterns, and shapes in each composition.

The establishment of these rules provided a common starting point upon which my cinematographer and I could begin piecing together the visual world of *Atmahaú Pakmát*. A brief exploration of each of these guidelines will prove useful in viewing the film and understanding the visual language upon which the film is built.

Throughout *Atmahaú Pakmát*, the camera remains fastened to the tripod almost without exception. The two instances in which the camera is employed without the use of a tripod occur in the border crossing sequences, (which are, in fact, mirrors of each other). The stoicism and sensation of “stillness” generated in the use of the tripod throughout establishes the overall tone of the film, while the departure from the use of the tripod in the border crossing sequences imbues these moments with an energy and visual destabilization that serves to highlight them in the film’s structure and visual architecture.

Similarly, the lack of pans, tilts, and rolls, as well as the use of proscenium / tableau compositions, further enforce the sensation of visual and narrative restraint present in the film. An important influence in the development of these guidelines was Sergei Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates*, a symbolist film that broadly recounts the life and death of 18th century Armenian poet, Sayat-Nova. Told entirely through a series of tableaux, the film encourages viewers to simply observe motion within the frame and slowly make conclusions over time. Similarly, *Atmahaú Pakmát* takes a compositional approach that remains distant, allowing viewers to view the film and the subjects "with their own eyes," as it were.

Another useful compositional tool is the use of quadrants, a system in which the frame is divided into four equal sections. The employment of this compositional system, which was incorporated into the film after reflecting upon Carl Th. Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and Paweł Pawlikowski's *Ida* (viewed in Professor Charles Ramirez Berg's "Alternative Poetics" course), provided a great deal of inspiration in bringing the world of the film to life. As an experiment, my cinematographer and I devised two variations of the quadrant system: 1) a more traditional "cross" (+) formation, and 2) a formation based on an "x" shape. In the first formation, a vertical line drawn down the middle of the frame and a horizontal line drawn across the middle create the compositional areas for the frame (the "quadrants.") In the second formation, a line is drawn connecting one corner of the frame with the diagonal corner. This is repeated with the two remaining corners, thus creating four isosceles triangles (rather than four squares, as in the first formation). Both versions may be found in *Atmahaú Pakmát*, although the cross (+) formation is more prevalent throughout.

An important element that helps distinguish *Atmahaú Pakmát* from other films is the fact that it was filmed on super 16mm film, rather than digitally. The reasons for this

are threefold: First, the intensity of the sun in the Chihuahuan Desert presented significant challenges in regards to exposure and balancing areas of shade with areas of extreme sunlight. While digital cameras have improved dramatically in regards to their ability to render detail across a broader spectrum of brightness, analog film (and, in this particular case, super 16mm film) has a dynamic range that has yet to be matched by its digital counterparts. That is, shooting on film allowed us greater flexibility while shooting in the harsh desert sun.

In addition to providing a dynamic range appropriate for the location, filming *Atmahaú Pakmát* provided an interesting challenge to me as a director—to complete the film and record all the necessary materials with a finite resource (i.e. the film stock). Given the budget constraints of the film, we were only able to purchase a limited amount of film stock, and, thus, were limited to a certain number of shots, sequences, and ideas. Were the film shot digitally we would have had the ability to delete unwanted takes, as well as review previous takes for consistency, exposure, color, and any number of other variables. Of course, with film, this was not the case. While the Arri SR2 camera with which we filmed *Atmahaú Pakmát* did have “video out” capabilities, this video feed proved unreliable as its frame differed from the frame visible in the camera’s eyepiece. Additionally, given the nature of analog film, (which cannot be exposed to sunlight until developed,) we were not able to “review” takes until the film stock had returned from the developer. As such, the decision to shoot the film on super 16mm film forced me as a director to know exactly what we needed, how much we needed of it, and how much room we had for experimentation and play. After consulting our budget with my producer, we decided that we would be able to afford a shooting ratio of 12:1 in order to produce a 26-minute film. That is, for every 1 minute of finished film we were able to shoot up to 12 minutes of material. The total runtime of *Atmahaú Pakmát* is just under 25

minutes, meaning that we were able to remain fairly close to our anticipated and budgeted shooting ratio.

The final element behind our decision to shoot on super 16mm film is more philosophical in nature, and centers around the “rendition” of time across mediums. In the Fall 2016 I was first exposed to the work of James Benning, namely his “California Trilogy:” *El Valle Centro*, *Los*, and *Sogobi*. In each of these films, (all of which were filmed on 16mm film), Benning explores a variety of landscapes through a series of long takes that roughly run the length of 100 foot rolls of 16mm film. The camera is completely static, never panning or tilting, (not unlike the camera in *Atmahaú Pakmát*). In viewing these films for the first time, I found myself asking repeatedly: “Why am I not losing interest?” Given the extremely long takes and the fact that changes throughout the course of any particular take are slight (some are, in fact, nearly imperceptible), I remained engaged with each shot. After returning to these films for repeated viewings, I came to a realization: Time ticks differently in celluloid. Put differently, the kinetics present within the medium itself imbue images shot on film with a certain “life” not present in digital counterparts. The visual attacks and decays of the film grain allow each moment to feel different, unique in its own way. After returning to Benning’s work, a second realization came to mind: These films would not be the same if shot digitally. In regard to *Atmahaú Pakmát*, super 16mm film provided a powerful counterpart to the stoic and reserved approach to the film and its subject. As with the case of Benning’s films, analog film provides the viewer with an opportunity to “slow down” and fully explore the images, sounds, and sequences captured in the Chihuahuan Desert.

As we have seen, the decision to film *Atmahaú Pakmát* on analog film was made for a number of reasons, including technical (in regards to exposure), creative (in regards to my preparation as a director), and philosophical (in regards to how time is rendered in

celluloid). Of course, this decision was not free of its drawbacks (for example, the use of a much larger, cumbersome camera, the difficulty of changing magazines in the desert, and the like). Nevertheless, shooting the film on super 16mm film opened up a number of creative avenues that would have been impossible when shooting on a comparable digital camera.

The pre-production stage of the film, in addition to being a time of great creative growth in regards to style and filmic approach, also provided an opportunity to explore the ways in which *Atmahaú Pakmát* aligned (or didn't align) with larger trends in the world of film production. In its initial stages, I began to consider the film a "documentary" in that it contained many of the tropes present in traditional documentary practice. These common tropes included distinct characters, (e.g. Jesusita Jimenez, the Rodriguez family, Simone Swan, et cetera,) some form of "conflict" (e.g. Simone Swan's failure to complete her mission of "housing the poor,"), and discreet locations (e.g. Swan House, the adobe yard, Simone Swan's apartment in Houston). However, as the project advanced through the pre-production stage, I began to realize that my ideas and thoughts around the film began to drift from "traditional" documentary practice. In a journal entry dated July 31st, 2016, I begin to reflect upon the nature of "documentary" film as it applies (or, again, doesn't apply) to the film:

It seems to me that the documentary form is as malleable as one would like it to be. What role does improvisation and randomization have in the "documentary" experience? Handing a subject a poem to read? What does it mean to cast a film into the unknown, the uncharted? [...] While there may be a certain amount of artifice in the construction and assembly of the film, what aesthetic and narrative possibilities would this open up? Would audiences have the patience to transition and follow these shifts in narrative? This sliding along the spectrum (pp. 162)?

Throughout the pre-production and production stages of the film, the lines between "documentary" and "narrative" practices began to become blurred. The finished film,

while it certainly maintains some elements of “documentary” practice, (especially in regards to the section that follows the Rodriguez family), continues to evade precise definition. While the terms “docu-fiction” or “hybrid” are oftentimes used to describe films that blur the lines between documentary and narrative, *Atmahaú Pakmát* seems to be a strange fit for these terms as well. At a personal level, the film is perhaps best described as a “non-fiction essay.” While imperfect in its own way, this term seems to begin to approximate the polyphony of creative approaches that have influenced the film and informed my work as a director. Additionally, in describing the film as a “non-fiction essay,” I hope to adequately prepare audiences for a filmic experience that will likely differ significantly from character- or issue-driven documentaries with which they may be familiar.

The pre-production stage, which ran roughly from October 2015 through November 2016 was a time of exploration, experimentation, and play. From my initial interest in working with artists along the Texas-Mexico border to the final subject of adobe production in the borderlands, the concept for *Atmahaú Pakmát* grew and shifted through each stage of production. The initial scouting trip made in April 2016 provided a critical opportunity to concretize ideas, meet potential subjects, and record valuable preliminary materials for fundraising purposes. Alongside fundraising efforts, the film developed as creative and aesthetic decisions began to be made in regards to the inclusion of spoken poetry, my interest in landscapes, and the incorporation of projected images. The establishment of specific guidelines for the camera, as well as decision to film on super 16mm film, began to open new creative doors, determine the film’s look, and inform my approach to the subject. A number of films, including Parajanov’s *The Color of Pomegranates*, Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, Pawlikowski’s *Ida*, and the films of Benning’s “California Trilogy” further influenced the development of *Atmahaú*

Pakmát. After 13 months of pre-production, the film crew and I were ready to embark upon the next stage of production—the filming itself.

Chapter 3: Production

While the pre-production stage was one of ideation and creative development, the production stage was one of execution. Having had such a lengthy pre-production period (which, again, spanned over 13 months), the film crew and I were well-prepared to embark upon our first production trip to the towns of Presidio, Texas and Ojinaga, Chihuahua. The first trip was made from December 6th-15th, 2016, and focused on recording materials in Presidio, Ojinaga, and the border crossing between the two sister cities. Plans were made in collaboration with our producer to stay at the Three Palms Inn, located in Presidio. While the accommodations available in this small West Texas town were far from “luxury,” they provided our crew with the basic necessities and would serve as our “home base” for the next 8 days of filming.

In the weeks prior to our departure, my cinematographer and I developed extensive shot lists for each location. While these shot lists continued to grow and evolve as we began filming, the following is a list of our desired shots upon leaving for West Texas:

Swan House

- Interview with Jesusita Jimenez
- Jesusita reading a poem for the camera
- Jesusita carrying books/things from one side of the room to the other
- Obscured coverage of Jesusita caring for the home
- Shots of projections along walls and ceilings, embrace textures
- Shots of the crew doing things (setting up, et cetera)
- Shot of crew starting generator (if noisy)
- Detail shots of arched domes and ceilings
- Looking through the thresholds of each room
- Visual exploration of collapsed ceiling
- Detail shots of interesting photos and documents hanging on the wall
- Detail shots of interesting items within each room
- EWS of Swan House and the surrounding desert landscape

- Maybe projections on the desert floor, camera from above / “scraping across desert floor” / different iterations of this
- Detail shots of interesting things outside of house
- Old-school tape player sitting in Swan House
- CU on a brick wall, showing detail of brick
- Tiles and geometry present on floor

Rodriguez adobe yard

- Interview with Manuel Rodriguez
- Manuel reading a poem for the camera
- Interview with Victor Rodriguez
- Victor reading a poem for the camera
- Interview with Juan Rodriguez
- Juan Rodriguez reading a poem for the camera
- Interior shot of Victor’s house, maybe with Victor inside
- Backlit shot of Victor getting up and heading out of his house
- Manuel demonstrating on how a brick is made
- Detail shot of harvesting and mixing clay
- CU of hands pushing clay into molds, residuals on hands
- Manuel and Juan carrying bricks from one end of the frame to the other, or maybe stacking up bricks in front of the camera
- Shots of the crew doing things (setting up, et cetera)
- Bricks being loaded into a truck (if possible)
- Rodriguez family taking a break, relaxing (maybe the crew will join in)
- Projections along the outer wall of Victor’s house, the Rodriguez family moving in and out of the projection, walking back and forth across the screen
- Projections “scraping” across the drying bricks / across individual bricks
- CU of adobe bricks drying on desert
- Graphical abstraction of bricks on ground (maybe golden hour bricks, look for the geometry)
- Old-school tape player sitting in the adobe yard
- Portrait of a stack of bricks (golden hour, pyramid)
- The stack of molds used to make the bricks (focus on the residuals, the messiness of making the bricks)
- ECU overhead portrait of a variety of bricks, one at a time
- Portraits of the clouds in the sky

Presidio-Ojinaga border crossing (U.S. side)

- Interview with U.S. border agent (if possible)
- Border agents reading a poem for the camera-- we’ll repeat this a couple of times (if possible)

- Interview set-up with border in the background
- WS of border from U.S. side
- Portraits of the signs leading up to the border (signs from both sides of the border)
- Interior car shot during border crossing
- Shots of the crew doing things (setting up, getting ready to cross, et cetera)

Presidio-Ojinaga border crossing (Mexico side)

- Interview with Mexican border agent (if possible)
- Border agents reading a poem for the camera-- we'll repeat this a couple of times (if possible)
- Interview set-up with border in the background
- WS of border from Mexico side
- Portraits of the signs leading up to the border (signs from both sides of the border)
- Interior car shot during border crossing
- Shots of the crew doing things (setting up, getting ready to cross, et cetera)

Along the river that divides the U.S. and Mexico

- WS of U.S.-Mexico border & river
- Details shots of fence (if there is one)
- Interview set-up
- Scenic portrait of the border division in the middle of the desert
- Old-school tape player sitting along the border fence

Ojinaga train station

- Still shots of the empty train station
- Rodriguez family and Jesusita (if she's able to visit Ojinaga) standing in the station
- Shots of the crew doing things (setting up, et cetera)
- Projections along one of the train station walls
- Projection on wall, camera 90° to wall, subjects walk into and stand in projection one by one

Chihuahuan Desert

- Abstractions of desert plants and rocks
 - cacti
 - ocotillo
 - sage
 - low brush

Locations that we'd like to get, but which aren't crucial:

- Around Presidio, TX
- "Downtown" Presidio

- Dusty desert diners, cafés, and businesses
- Portraits of Presidio residents outside of their homes
- Abandoned homes, homes that are falling apart

Around Ojinaga, Chihuahua

- Shots of the main square
- Portraits of Ojinaga residents outside of their homes

Upon even a cursory review, it becomes readily apparent that the above shot list was quite ambitious, especially given the difficult shooting conditions of the desert, our relatively small crew size, and the fact that the film was to be shot on celluloid rather than digitally. As is oftentimes the case, this shot list served as a guide for our production days in Presidio and Ojinaga, but was also adjusted as necessary throughout the production period. While our coverage of Swan House and the adobe yard remained fairly faithful to the above, our coverage of the border crossing was limited due to our restricted mobility within the border zone. Additionally, there are some locations which were filmed, but which did not end up in the finished film. These include the Ojinaga train station, and a variety of shots filmed in the towns of Presidio and Ojinaga. Finally, the more reflexive moments of the shot list (for instance, the “shots of crew doing things”) were limited due to time constraints and crew size. That is, our camera crew could not simultaneously film reflexive “behind the scenes” material while also preparing for the next shot.

The number of crew members present during our time in the West Texas region was the result of many important conversations. Given that we were to shoot on 16mm film and use a significantly larger, bulkier camera, it was fairly obvious that we would not be able to make *Atmahaú Pakmát* with a “skeleton crew” of three or four individuals. In discussing the issue with my cinematographer, we agreed that the camera department would require at least a 1st AC and a 2nd AC in order to effectively capture the above materials in the relatively short time frame of 8 production days. Our location mixer, Will

Harrell, assured us that he would feel comfortable mixing and operating the boom microphone simultaneously, keeping our sound department at one member strong. Our consulting producer, Sandro Canovas, served as a valuable local “fixer” who was able to coordinate meetings with subjects in the film, make recommendations in regards to local food and restaurants, as well as point out potential areas in the region which might make good locations for additional scenes and shots. These crew members plus our producer, Makena Buchanan, and myself resulted in a crew size of 7. While there were moments in which it would have been very helpful to have an additional camera assistant, a dedicated boom operator, or a spare production assistant, the crew size of 7 allowed us to move quickly and efficiently, while not losing the intimacy brought about by having a smaller crew size.

While there were certainly moments of difficulty during our days of production in the region, the shoot was an overall success and we were able to capture the vast majority of material listed on our shot list. Of course, some compromises needed to be made in order to accommodate changes in schedule, subject availability, location access, and other variables. These adjustments, however, are part and parcel with making films and oftentimes lead to creative innovations that would not have been considered under “ideal” circumstances. After returning to Austin from the West Texas region, my producer and I immediately shipped the film off to Cine Lab Motion Picture Film Laboratory Services for development and digital transfer.

The second portion of production for *Atmahaú Pakmát* centered around recording an interview with Simone Swan, the creative mind behind Swan House and co-founder of the Adobe Alliance. Although Simone lived in Swan House from the late-1990s through the mid-2000s, she has since relocated. When pre-production began on the film Simone was based in Tucson, Arizona, visiting Swan House only occasionally. At a later point

during the pre-production stage, she moved to the Montrose neighborhood of Houston, Texas. Having worked closely with the Menil Foundation in her earlier years, Simone's move to Houston might have been somewhat of a "coming home" for her after many years living and working elsewhere. After a few weeks of email communication with Simone and her personal assistant Misty, we were able to schedule a date to visit Simone and interview her for the film. The crew left Austin on the evening of March 4th, 2017 to interview Simone the following day.

While our departure from Austin went smoothly, we were greeted by significant rain on the morning of the 5th. Thankfully, our shoot was scheduled to be completely indoors, although we were met with complications in regards to unloading the film equipment in the rain. Nevertheless, the equipment was successfully loaded into Simone's condominium and the crew began setting up.

Although our main goal for this shoot was to record an interview with Simone about her experiences working with adobe in West Texas, I developed small handful of scenes that would serve to complement the interview. The shot list, which was created in collaboration with my cinematographer, was as follows:

Simone's Houston condominium

- Interview with Simone Swan
- Simone's friend hanging up painting while Simone talks about the painting
- Simone and her friend reading / inhabiting the same room
- Projections in Simone's house along walls and ceilings
- Old-school boom box in Simone's condo
- CU of boom box
- Stills of interesting things around Simone's house and on walls
- Simone interacting with the space (sitting, reading, walking around, et cetera)
- Obscured shots of Simone around corners
- CU shots of Simone's photos, books and documents
- Looking through thresholds
- CU shots of any photos of Jesusita found around the house

- Simone working / sending emails / doing daily tasks
- EWS of Simone's house from outside

As is apparent, the above shot list is much simpler than its West Texas counterpart. This is due to two main factors: 1) time limitations, and 2) out of respect for the subject. While the crew and I had eight production days in which to capture the desired materials in West Texas, we had access to Simone for only one day. Additionally, given her age (at the time of recording Simone was 88 years old), we wanted to remain sensitive to her energy levels, ensuring not to plan too much for one day. One interesting element introduced by the subject was Simone's invitation to an artist friend of hers to "participate" in the recording. While this individual was not included on our initial shot list, we attempted to incorporate him into our recording schedule as best as possible.

Despite the rain, we were able to have a successful day of recording with Simone. We did, however, reach a point in the late afternoon in which it became apparent that it was time to pack up our things and head back to Austin. Thankfully, we were able to capture the majority of our desired material. As we returned to Austin with the film "shot out," my energies and focus began to shift towards the editing process.

Chapter 4: Post-production

As with pre-production, the editing and post-production stage is one of play and exploration. After having received the transferred film back from Cine Lab, I set out to begin syncing the video and audio from our two shoots. Unfortunately, this initial stage presented a slight technical complication, but not one that was without solution. Unknown to me at the time, our sound recordist had recorded our production audio with a sample rate of 48kHz, which is standard on most sets. However, *Atmahaú Pakmát* was filmed on 16mm film, which records at 24 frames per second and was “pulled down” to 23.978 frames per second upon being digitized. As such, the audio should have been recorded with a sample rate of 48.048 kHz in order to account for the video pulldown. Thankfully, with the help of RTF technical staff Jeremy Gruy, I was able to reinterpret the audio at 48.048 kHz and begin syncing the video and audio within Avid Media Composer. The loss of quality in reinterpreting our production audio was minimal, with no noticeable difference to the human ear.

With the audio and video synced, it was now time to subclip and log each take. During the syncing process, I attempted to view as little of each take as possible—limiting my viewing to the slate marker and scrubbing through the take to ensure sync. The subclipping and logging steps were my first (and only) opportunity to view the footage “for the first time” and respond to the moments found therein. While my viewing as a director will never be the same as that of a first-time audience member, it was critical that I watch each take once and only one, recording my initial reactions on a log sheet developed during the editing stage of my previous film, *El Tucán*. This logging method focuses on collecting three types of information about each take: 1) timecode, 2) description, and 3) rating. The timecode for each take was recorded at the first useable

frame of the take (e.g. after the slate has left frame and the camera has settled). The description of the take was simply an explanation of the action that takes place in the take and/or what the subject of the take was. Finally, the rating was based on initial gut reactions, rated 1 star to 5 stars (with 1 being unusable and 5 being highly favored). This approach to logging was applied to each minute of filmed material, including outtakes, perceived errors, or captured material that was not “planned” or “expected.” These logged entries were, in turn, organized by location (e.g. Swan House, adobe yard, train station, desert, et cetera).

After having logged the six hours of footage recorded in Presidio, Ojinaga, and Houston, I turned to what I have come to refer to as the “paper edit.” It is here that my editing process may differ from that of my peers. To begin the paper edit stage, I generate a sticky note for each highly-rated take (4 and 5 star ratings only—I do not re-watch 1 and 2 star clips, and only turn to 3 star clips as needed). These sticky notes were color coded based on location, as I knew the film would likely be structured around location. At this point, I reviewed each 4 and 5 star subclip and took note as to whether the clip felt like a “beginning” (i.e. something that could introduce a new scene, new topic, or the film as a whole), a “middle” (i.e. something that needed to be preceded by something else), or an “end” (i.e. something that finished a scene, idea, or had a “concluding” tone about it.)

With my “beginnings,” “middles,” and “ends” in hand, I began to assemble the paper edit, pasting each of the sticky notes on strips of butcher paper, thus creating a “timeline” of sorts. This process continued until I had arrived at a structure that contained at least some level of logic, flow, and sensibility towards character, information, and overall structure. Of course, this paper edit would only serve as an initial starting point, but it proved very useful in evaluating the narrative potential each shot and beginning to

experiment with how each shot might fit in (or not fit in) with the overarching story that was beginning to take shape. It should be noted that the first two weeks of “editing” was spent away from the computer. With *Atmahaú Pakmát* it became important that I engage with our footage in a conceptual, structural, and philosophical manner before worrying about specific details present within each shot (e.g. continuity, time of day, chronology in regards to the shoot, and the like). With an understanding of the narrative “logic” built underneath the film, I began to translate my paper edit to a digital timeline.

The assembly stage of post-production is oftentimes the stage filled with the most questions and the fewest answers. Upon translating the paper edit to my timeline, it became clear that some of the included takes felt unnecessary, weren’t flowing with the rest of the piece, and/or left something to be desired. Additionally, this first version of the digitized paper edit raised important questions about character introduction, pacing, and the flow of information throughout the film. In these preliminary weeks of constructing the assembly, one fact remained clear throughout: this film would be long. The translated paper edit rendered a timeline with a runtime of nearly two and half hours. While very long assemblies are common (and, in fact, preferred in many ways), there were a number of long takes within this lengthy assembly that I felt would not be shortened significantly. While I knew that the film would certainly shorten naturally as I continued through the edit, I was also aware that some sections would be difficult to shorten given the way in which they were filmed and the importance of length to these shots (that is, these long takes would lose much of their “impact” when shortened). Nevertheless, I continued forward, addressing the preliminary issues present in the paper edit, removing unnecessary materials, and changing the position of particular shots as needed.

After a few weeks of cutting, tightening, and narrowing down, I arrived at a version that was divided into seven parts, organized by location: 1) A prologue in

Presidio/Ojinaga, 2) Chapter 1: Simone Swan's Houston home, 3) Chapter 2: Swan House, 4) Chapter 3: The Presidio-Ojinaga border crossing, 5) Chapter 4: The adobe yard, 6) Chapter 5: The Ojinaga-Presidio border crossing, and 7) An epilogue on the Rio Grande. It was with this cut that I transitioned from the assembly stage to the rough cut stage.

The rough cut differed from the assembly stage in that the majority of my energies were spent in procedural revisions decided upon watching the cut. After a week of rough cut revisions, I arrived at a version with a runtime of 54 minutes. Despite the shortening, this is considered extremely long for both a short film and a student film. Herein lies the first of two important questions discovered in the rough cut stage: How long should this film be? During the pre-production stage, my cinematographer, producer and I had settled on a 12:1 shooting ratio, with a 26-minute final runtime in mind (roughly a broadcast half hour). However, the rough cut at which I had arrived translated to a 6:1 shooting ratio, and, due to its length, would be classified as a "feature film" by many film festivals that limit short film submissions to films under 45-minutes. While I found the 54-minute version of *Atmahaú Pakmát* to be fascinating in its own right, I eventually came to admit that it was simply too long and too cumbersome to be completed successfully within my post-production timeline. In arriving at the conclusion that the film was too long, the second question arose: What material needs to be cut?

Given the film's length and the fact that many of the long takes simply couldn't be "made shorter" without losing some of their charm, I now needed to make a decision as to what could be removed. After watching the 54-minute rough cut again, I determined that the area that was proving the most difficult was Chapter 1, the section of material filmed in Simone's Houston home. As an experiment, I removed this material from the timeline entirely. The result of this cut was an ~45-minute version that cut directly from

the image of the grave to the section about Swan House—hardly a bridge that I wanted to attempt to “smooth over.” This cut, while no longer featuring the “problem areas” present in Chapter 1, felt unbalanced, especially in regards to the sections with Jesusita in Swan House. In considering this version, I realized that Jesusita’s narrative could not exist as edited without Simone’s narrative to balance it. This led me to the second experimental idea—removing Chapter 2, the section of material filmed at Swan House and with Jesusita.

While these two experimental passes seemed to remove important elements which initially drew me to the project (the relationship between Simone and Jesusita, and the potentially failed mission of their non-profit), the resulting version had a beautiful simplicity to it. Narratively, this version was structured as follows: 1) Prologue, 2) Presidio-Ojinaga border crossing, 3) Adobe yard, 4) Ojinaga-Presidio border crossing, and 5) Epilogue. Additionally, the new runtime after removing the Houston and Swan House sections was a lean 22-minutes—a length that significantly alleviated my preoccupations in regards to film festival “programmability.” Finally, this newest version still remained true to the initial parameters I had placed upon myself and my thesis film nearly a year and a half earlier: 1) Focus on a subject other than music or other “folk” cultures, 2) Film along the U.S.-Mexico border, and 3) Work with artisans and/or explore “manual” crafts. After sleeping on this experimental cut for a night, I awoke with an answer: these cuts would stay.

The reduction in length and simplification of narrative quickly moved the project from rough cut stage to fine cut stage. As its name suggest, the fine cut was a time for small tweaks, adjustments to timing and pace, and an overall “cleaning up” of the film. The removal of the previous chapters resulted in a handful of narrative “holes” that would be needed to be filled. However, these were easily compensated for through the re-

inclusion of material initially removed during the assembly stage due to being deemed “too long” or “not fitting” into the larger 7-part structure of the initial rough draft. As is oftentimes the case in post-production, sometimes material needs to be removed in order to realize its importance at a later point in the editing process.

As quickly as our production days came and went, so did the post-production stage. Upon arriving at a “picture lock” I delivered the materials to our sound mixer (Evan Dunivan) and colorist (Dan Stuyck) to begin working on the film. The mix occurred over a three-day period in which Evan and I made adjustments to volume levels, cleaned up dialogue lines, and targeted problem areas of noise, interference, or intelligibility issues. Dan worked alone for two days, followed by a third day in which we addressed tweaks to the color of the film. Once the mixed audio and color corrected video were collected, these were reimported into Avid Media Composer and prepped for final export, which would happen in the following days.

Arriving to the end of the post-production stage represented the culmination of nearly a year and a half of work and collaboration with countless friends and colleagues. Of course, *Atmahaú Pakmát* also brought with it its fair share of challenges, trials, and tribulations. As my MFA thesis film, it certainly tested my patience, determination, and voice as a director. However, with each challenge came an opportunity to grow, learn from one’s mistakes, and find creative solutions to less than ideal circumstances. As the editing stage has come to a close, I will now begin to focus my energies on submitting the film to film festivals and organizing a screening in Presidio and Ojinaga. Film festival submissions will begin in summer 2017, while the local screening in Presidio/Ojinaga will likely be held in Fall 2018.

Closing

As we have seen, this document has been a “map” of sorts, tracing the journey of *Atmahaú Pakmát* from initial idea to completed film. Additionally, the above pages provide a snapshot of my personal creative process and growth over roughly a year and a half period. It is my hope that this document might prove an interesting complement to the film, as well as be useful in coming to better understand one filmmaker’s personal approach to his craft. Additionally, I look forward to returning to this report at a later date, revisiting its pages to reflect upon how I’ve continued to grow as an artist and filmmaker.

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